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# Consumer Education To Minimize The Abuse Of Foods

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Considerable food loss and spoilage occurs in the home and other eating places because of food abuse. The consumer often uses undesirable food storage and preparation procedures because he does not have sufficient knowledge or interest to improve these behavior patterns.

In this issue of Nutrition Program News we will discuss consumer education programs that would minimize the abuse of foods which occurs once food is in the hands of the consumer.

## GOVERNMENT PROTECTION

The Federal Government has a major role in assuring the safety and wholesomeness of food available to consumers. Pure food and drug legislation began in the United States in 1848 with the prohibition of the importation of adulterated or deteriorated drugs. Import prohibitions were extended to other products in 1883 and 1897.

Harvey C. Wiley, Chief Chemist, U.S. Department of Agriculture, was largely responsible for the extension of food and drug legislation to cover domestic products. In 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt advocated a Federal food and drug law. The Federal Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act, both passed in 1906, established the responsibility of the Federal Government to bar hazardous, adulterated, or misbranded foods from the market place.

## CONSUMER'S ROLE

Strict laws, inspection, and enforcement of the laws can eliminate most of the food hazards which occur before food is delivered to the consumer. However, the consumer must voluntarily protect the nutritional and sanitary state of food once it is in his possession. He must also be aware of the need to ensure the nutrition and sanitation of prepared food he consumes or purchases in public eating places. The efforts of food producers, manufacturers, and handlers, and the vigilance of Government agencies can be largely wasted if the consumer does not continue the chain of careful food care.

## NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON FOOD PROTECTION

In April 1971, a National Conference on Food Protection was held in Denver, Colorado. The Conference was sponsored by the American Public Health Association and the Food and Drug Administration, with consultant help from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Ten panels of experts were selected to study aspects of the protection of food from microbial contamination. Each panel invited 30 to 45 specialists to meet in Denver where position papers on each of the selected aspects of food protection were prepared, discussed in workshop sessions, and revised. A composite of these papers was prepared. Hopefully it will be used to establish a national policy on food protection.

One of the Conference groups, the Food Protection Panel on Consumer Education, dealt with the particular need for education of the consumer that will minimize the abuse of foods. Participants were interested in determining the most desirable modes of action for local, regional, State, and Federal programs responsible for influencing consumer behavior pertaining to food. The discussions and recommendations which were developed are presented below.

## GENERAL CONCEPTS IN CONSUMER EDUCATION TO MINIMIZE FOOD ABUSE

### Aim of consumer education

The purpose of the consumer education under discussion is to influence consumers to store, handle, and prepare food so as to preserve its nutritional and sanitary status.

### Motivation and information

The consumer needs to be fully involved in the educational programs and to have an influential role in program planning, implementation, and followup activities.

It is essential that the information presented in consumer education programs be accurate and that it be presented in terms which are meaningful to the public. Accurate, clear, and concise information is not enough. The content and mode of information must be relevant to the life of the individual so that he will consider what he has learned and make desirable alterations in his personal behavior.

### Consumer interest and involvement

The consumer is not likely to view food abuse as a separate issue. He is most likely to see it as an aspect of food purchase, storage, preparation, and consumption.

Occasionally, interest in food abuse flares when dramatic warnings or adverse situations related to food are headlined by the mass media. Apart from such developments, the consumer tends to expect foods to be safe and feels that Government controls and regulations reduce the need for vigilance on his part.

An initial concern in programs of consumer education on food abuse is to convince the consumer that how he handles his food does make a difference. He must act to preserve the sanitation and nutritional status of the food he ultimately eats.

## MODES OF CONSUMER EDUCATION

### Mass media

Consumer education via mass media (radio, press, television, pamphlets, labels, etc.) allows contact with a great number of people at a comparatively low cost-per-person rate. Mass media approaches are directed toward a general audience and are by their nature nonpersonal.

Mass media education functions on the premise that people are willing to listen or read and are willing to change their behavior as a result of information received. Some consumers will take the desired action as a result of such an educational contact; many will not respond with a change in habits. Successful mass media education should be designed with the particular characteristics of the target groups in mind. The appeal must be reasonable and meaningful to the way of life of each consumer.

### Personal methods

Personal methods of education are those in which there is direct contact between the disseminators and receivers of information. These methods are flexible and easily adapted to various consumer groups, to small groups, and to home situations, and offer the opportunity for rapid feedback of responses to the program. The success of the program can thus be readily determined, and desirable changes in format can be made as the program progresses.

However, personal methods of education require greater numbers of workers than do mass media approaches. Leaders who can function effectively in personal learning situations and who are able to adapt the program to the motives and felt needs of each individual or group are necessary for a successful education program.

## PLAN OF ACTION

A plan of action needs to be established in order to insure the availability of a coordinated education program on food abuse. The program should be organized from the local to Federal level with an emphasis on coordination among the various agencies at each level and among the various levels.

The action plan discussed below is based on the assumption that the primary objective of the programs is to influence the behavior of the consumer in the area of food handling.

## LOCAL LEVEL

The local program should include both personal and nonpersonal consumer approaches. Flexible and adaptable personal programs will need to be developed for each of the economic, ethnic, and educational groups within the community—so that the advice offered will be meaningful and adaptable to the life of the individuals. Weekly food purchases will not be suggested to people who lack refrigeration, storage space, or sufficient funds to make large purchases. The presentations will be designed to neither insult nor exceed the educational ability of each consumer group. The program will be directed toward the individuals who are responsible for food shopping and handling.

### Representative consumer participation

It is essential that community leaders, official or unofficial, be selected by the community and be involved in the program. If community leaders are reached in a consumer education program, they will spread the program information by virtue of their position and contact with others. In addition, these leaders can aid the program by encouraging communication between program participants and leaders and by identifying the information most desired by the local groups.

### Mass media support

Publicity on the nature of the food program and the leaders or participants involved will heighten interest and

increase participation in the personal phases of the food abuse programs. Radio, television, and/or newspaper coverage of activities or presentation of related topics would be advantageous and would best be fostered by citizens and consumer groups interested in the program.

### Mode of consumer contact

Food safety education will be most effective if included in more general courses involving food or health practices. It is most desirable to offer education in food safety when consumers are susceptible to advice and available to the program. Mothers in well-baby or maternal and infant care programs and parents with nursery school children are likely to be concerned with food safety because of the age and dependency of their children. It is possible to reach students of all ages with food information incorporated into biology, home economics, or health curricula. Long range plans should include the development of sequential programs of food protection from elementary through university and teacher training courses.

Parent education can be offered in conjunction with such groups as Parent-Teacher Associations or Head Start Programs. Interest in feeding practices can be investigated in school lunch programs or student or employee cafeterias. Food safety education could be a part of on-the-job education programs in non-food-related occupations.

### Responsibility for programs

Food safety education may be neglected unless it is a specific responsibility of a worker at the local level. Ideally, each agency would select an individual to serve as its expert on food protection information and to be responsible for communication with other agencies.

### Training personnel

In order to have an extensive local program involving personal contact methods of education, it will be necessary to increase the number of professionals or paraprofessionals. The success of the program depends on the ability of the leaders to alter the behavior pattern of clients. Training procedures often emphasize only the subject matter involved. Skills in data gathering and analysis and in successful techniques for modifying the behavior of clients will need to be taught. Enhancing the human relations skills of the trainees is most important.

Indigenous, nonprofessional aides could be of great help in local programs. Their value in nutrition education programs has recently been cited (Nutrition Program News, May-June 1971). The excellent communication and empathy which many of the nonprofessional aides have with their clients would increase the probability that suggested procedures would be adopted. It is possible that food safety materials could be incorporated into current programs involving nonprofessional aides.

## COUNTY, REGIONAL, AND STATE LEVELS

### Consumer participation

Consumer representation in planning and decision-making is as necessary in these programs as it is in local level programs. The consumer participants will probably be political leaders who will recruit individuals from the local or grass roots level. It is important that the consumers involved in the organizational aspects of the program be representative of the various facets of the community.

### Interagency operations

State boards of health, departments of agriculture, county extension agents, social welfare agencies, and other State and county agencies need to work closely with each other in food safety programs. They can thus be of service to each other and avoid costly and unnecessary duplications of programs.

### Technical assistance and training

State level clearing houses for the collection, evaluation, and dissemination of data and information on food safety are needed. The information should be available to agencies and individuals for training programs or professional stimulation. Information should also be available for use in local education programs. In time, the State clearing houses would become central libraries of written and visual food safety materials. Technical training would be enhanced by seminars or meetings designed to keep personnel informed of the latest information and methods pertinent to food safety.

### Coordination and stimulation of programs

The States could aid in diffusion of information pertaining to successful regional programs through professional meetings, publications, or interagency communications. Radio, television, or newspaper accounts could be used to keep food protection issues before the public.

## NATIONAL LEVEL

### Consumer participation

Consumer participants, needed at the national level also, will be more political and more expert than at the regional or local levels, but must continue to represent the eco-

nomic, racial, ethnic, urban, and rural portions of the population. "Middle America" alone cannot plan and implement a successful, pertinent program for all people.

### Mass Media

Expert groups and a national consumer council should, with industry cooperation, make recommendations and exercise surveillance over advertising and labeling that pertain to nutritional or sanitary requirements for handling, storing, or cooking food. Radio or television programs which include consumer education on food protection would be desirable. Reading materials for the layman on food protection are needed. A constant flow of news and information on food protection would aid the consumer in his daily practices and reduce the alarm and panic which now occur when special incidents of contamination or danger are reported.

### Agency communications

At the Federal level also, consumer or public education would benefit from close liaison between the various agencies concerned with health, education, food, and nutrition. A liaison body—similar to the current Federal level Interagency Committee on Nutrition Education (ICNE) or State nutrition committees which are composed of representatives from several agencies—could be organized to compare and discuss programs on food protection aspects of consumer education.

### Clearing house

A central clearing house of information and studies, data collection, and analysis is needed at the Federal level. Scientific, behavioral, and social research personnel should be part of the library. The information should be readily available to agencies and individuals.

### Pilot programs and training

Federal support, technical and financial, would be a great aid in the enlargement of food protection education services for consumers. Training methods need to be developed and tested. Pilot programs are needed to determine the success of trained personnel and developed materials.

## CONCLUSION

In this issue of Nutrition Program News we have defined a problem, namely food abuse by consumers, and have discussed the need for action to reduce the incidence of this abuse. Modes of action, suggested by the Food Protection Panel on Consumer Education at the National Conference on Food Protection, have been presented.

The members of this Panel feel that consumer education on food abuse should receive greater consideration and funding. They recommend that a committee of experts in fields related to consumer protection, including the biological, behavioral, and social sciences, be formed to summarize and recommend actual plans for implementation of a program designed to reduce consumer abuse of foods.

The State clearing houses and a central Federal clearing house of data, analysis, and information on consumer food protection do not exist. Present communication among the various agencies at each level may be less than desirable. Local programs related to foods, nutrition, or health may or may not include food protection information.

Nutritionists and related professionals at the local level can now make definite efforts to include food protection information in their programs. They can act to keep the idea of food protection active in their clients' minds, and to impress them with the necessity for positive action to protect the sanitation and nutritional quality of their food. Efforts can be made to determine the activities of other local agencies in the field of food protection—and to coordinate, complement, or continue current programs. Action at the local level can call for the establishment and services of State and Federal clearing houses of information and service.

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